



GGNRA Park Archives

Crissy Airfield in 1919.

Death-Defying Firsts at Crissy Field



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Pilots took their families up to prove that aircraft were safe.

Have you ever been scared during an airplane flight? Most of us have at one time or another, even in today’s very safe aircraft. However, during the pioneering days of flight, every trip was death-defying and possibly one’s last.

The early pilots flying in and out of Crissy Field performed many aviation firsts, putting their life on the line every day to prove that airplanes were useful and reliable. Their contributions and commitment played a key role in making air travel safe and routine for all. In 1919 the army built an airfield on the Presidio to

advance the military potential of airplanes proven by their success in World War I. But even before the airfield’s completion in 1921, it had already seen aviation history being made. As early as 1915, crowds gathered here to see if the “father of aerobatics” perform daring feats at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

Standing on the grass of Crissy Field today, we can only imagine the wild cheers as the first flight around the world landed, or the fearful good-byes as the first flight to Hawaii departed. Crissy Field saw all these daring landmark events and more.

“Father of Aerobatics”



Frank Marrero Collection

Lincoln Beachey flies his “Little Looper” in 1913.

Even in the early years of aviation, Lincoln Beachey, the father of aerobatics, knew that airplanes would one day be reliable and commonplace transportation. To promote this belief, he flew anytime he could find an audience. And it wasn’t hard. Crowds flocked to see his stunts and if he would survive them. Beachey was the first person to fly upside down, and to perform a tail slide and a spin recovery. So when the Panama-Pacific International Exposition

opened in San Francisco, he became a main attraction flying over what would become Crissy Field.

While performing stunts here in a new, early monoplane, its wings collapsed. Beachey was unable to escape the harness that held him to the sinking plane. He ultimately drowned in the bay between Crissy Field and Fort Mason.

Success or Failure?

On October 8, 1919, the First Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test captivated the nation when 46 pilots departed Roosevelt Field, Long Island, headed west, and 15 planes left the yet unnamed airfield at the Presidio for the east coast. Three days later at Roosevelt Field, New York, a tired Captain Lowell H. Smith ended the first military flight to span the continent.

Of the 61 planes in the test, only nine finished the flight, and nine men died enroute. Among those killed was Major Dana Crissy, commander of Mather Field in Sacramento. Moved by the loss of his friend, Major Hap Arnold, commander of the Presidio airfield, requested it be named Crissy Field.



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Major Dana Crissy was survived by his wife and two children.

Magellans of the Air

The world watched with excitement, as four Douglas World Cruisers and their pilots made a daring attempt to fly around the world in 1924. The *Seattle*, *Chicago*, *Boston* and *New Orleans*, lifted off from Clover Field, Seattle, Washington, on April 6, commencing their historic around-the-world flight. Early on, the *Seattle* crashed into a fog-shrouded mountain in Alaska, placing Captain Lowell H. Smith, the first army pilot to fly coast to coast, in command of the mission. Later, the *Boston* was lost at sea.

Near the end of their journey, the courageous pilots received a hero's welcome at Crissy Field. When the surviving aircraft finally returned to Clover Field on

September 28th, the *Chicago* and *New Orleans* had covered 26,345 miles in 172 days.

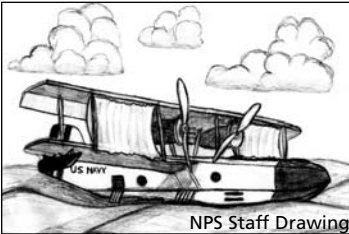


Crowds of thousands greet around-the-world fliers at Crissy Field.

Surviving the Pacific



Right: Inspecting the PN-9 at Crissy Field, after being forced down. Note the damaged right wing tip.



Sails were cut from canvas wings.

After the around-the-world flight, which made short hops between the northern continents, the nation engaged the next big challenge—long distance flight crossing entire oceans. In August of 1925, Navy Commander John Rogers led two seaplanes down the ramp into the bay at Crissy Field to meet that challenge. After crossing six miles of the bay at full throttle, the PN-9 planes finally became airborne and sped west towards Hawaii at 115 miles per hour.

Within five hours, an oil leak forced one plane down. But Commander Rogers and his crew flew on alone. More than 400 miles short of Hawaii fuel became low, causing Rogers to fly off course in search of a refueling ship. Eventually the plane ran out of fuel, which not only stopped the engines but also the radio. This left the

crew stranded in shark-infested waters with a perilously small food supply. Resorting to their naval training, the men made sails from the canvas wings. Imagine the crew's thoughts as they sailed ever-so-slowly toward Hawaii, watching for ships or land, but seeing neither until they reached Kauai, Hawaii over a week later.

After the Navy failed to fly to Hawaii, the Army Air Corps tried two years later. The runway at Crissy was too short for the fully fueled Fokker C-2 to take off, so the crew flew to Oakland airport for final fueling. Charles Lindbergh called this “the most perfectly organized and carefully planned flight ever attempted.” Piloted by lieutenants Lester J. Maitland and Albert F. Hegenberger, the “*Bird of Paradise*” successfully completed the trip to Hawaii in under 26 hours.

Crissy Field Today



Crowds once again flock to see things fly at opening day of the restored Crissy Field.

Standing tribute, today's Crissy Field is the most intact 1920s Army airfield west of the Mississippi. The restored grass field and surrounding original buildings reflect the area's appearance when the pioneers of flight made history here. As you look across the field, you can almost hear the roar of aircraft as young aviators took off, risking their lives to make air travel the safe and reliable form of transportation that it is today.

